

Rejoice in the Lord
Phil 4:1-9
October 12, 2008
Kory Wilcoxson

I'm a bit amazed that I've never preached on this passage before, because it played a major role in me being ordained. Part of the ordination process in Indiana involves going before an Ordination Council, a group of clergy and laypeople who are charged with determining your readiness for ordination. To call it an inquisition may be a bit strong, although a few times I did feel a bit like a suspect on "Law & Order." "So Kory, let's talk about Jesus' crucifixion – did you have anything to do with it?"

My Ordination Council came at a difficult time for me. I had only been out of the hospital for a week after being diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis. While I was excited about being ordained, I had other things on my mind. After a series of difficult questions, one of the laypeople, an Elder from my home church named Joanne, asked, "Is there one scripture passage that you find to be especially meaningful?" And without even stopping to think I said, through my tears, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Do not be anxious about anything but in everything present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." The strange thing is that I had never memorized that verse and didn't even know that I knew it until I opened my mouth to say it.

This section of Philippians has some amazing words of comfort and hope. In fact, the whole letter centers on the theme of joy in the midst of difficulties, something we all need to hear, as did the Philippians. Not only was the church dealing with persecution because of their faith, but they were also experiencing some in-fighting. Paul addresses this when he says things like, "Do everything without complaining or arguing" and "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of Christ." I bet when those words were read, Euodia said to herself, "Amen, Paul! I sure hope Syntyche is listening" and Syntyche was thinking, "Thanks Paul, that's just what Euodia needs to hear." So imagine how these two ladies felt when the letter calls them out specifically. Gulp!

We don't know who they are or what they are fighting about, but Paul calls on the whole resources of the church to help mend this division. No effort is too great to maintain peace in a church. I know of way too many churches that have split or dissolved because it was a lot easier to keep disagreeing than to agree with each other in the Lord. Church should be the last place where there is conflict, yet when you work side by side with someone, you will occasionally elbow each other. Whenever two people are in close proximity, there's a good chance for friction and Paul calls on the whole church to help stop this small fire from consuming the church.

I feel sorry for Euodia and Syntyche here. These two ladies have gone down in history for this one thing: being in conflict with each other. Reading this made me step back and look at my life right now and think, "Suppose I was to go down in history with one thing being known about me. What would that one thing be? Is there something in my life right now that I would rather people not know about me?"

I believe that's the question Paul is getting at later in this section when he starts talking about the things Christians should think about. "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if

anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things. And the peace of God will be with you.” My guess is Euodia and Syntyche did a lot of thinking about each other, and I doubt their thoughts were lovely or admirable, which means the peace of God was probably not with them. If we are lacking peace in our own lives, we may want to take an inventory on what kind of things we’re thinking about.

I believe Paul gives this guidance about this because he knows there is so much in this world that seeks to distract us away from God. Paul was certainly susceptible to that. The irony of this letter is that while sitting in a prison cell, Paul writes to group of poor people, many of them slaves, who had zero security in this world. And yet Paul says, “Rejoice.” In fact, he says it twice, as if we aren’t going to believe him the first time. “Rejoice!” C’mon, Paul you’ve got to be kidding. “Again I say rejoice!”

But he knows this is hard, so he follows up that exhortation with the phrase, “Do not be anxious about anything.” Do those words ring a bit hollow to us right now? Maybe a more apt phrase would be, “Try not to be anxious about everything!” It seems like every day the world gives us something more to worry about. Life is a worrying thing. There is so much that is out of our control, out of our hands, and that feeling of helplessness is like an anxiety factory in our brain.

Where I grew up in southern Indiana there was a dry ice factory with two huge smokestacks and every day big puffs of white smoke would stream up from it. Because I was young and didn’t own a hybrid car and was not at all concerned about the size of my carbon footprint, I thought this was cool and I called it the “cloud-making factory.”

What I envision in our brains is this little factory that makes puffs of anxiety that are constantly filling the space in our heads. There’s a cloud of anxiety about the economy, our children, our earth, our finances, the noise our car is making, our increasingly frail parents or loved ones. Puff, puff, puff, until our heads are filled with anxiety, leaving no room for other thoughts like hope.

What Paul is encouraging us to do is to put a stopper in those smokestacks in the form of prayer. “In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Do you ever not take something to God in prayer? Maybe you think God’s too busy, or can’t really do anything about it, or your request is too small or too selfish. But Paul doesn’t put any qualifiers on this. “In everything” he says. When Molly draws a picture or Sydney makes a craft, they come running to show us. Do we say, “Don’t bother me with that, Molly. I don’t have time.” Of course not! If we as parents make time to listen to children’s requests, why shouldn’t our Parent in heaven do the same? There is nothing too great for God’s power and nothing too small for God’s care.

Paul says that taking our requests to God leads to the imparting of peace. This is not just absence-of-conflict peace. This is what the Jews call “shalom,” the peace of God which passes all our understanding and transforms all our anxiety. Before God’s peace, we had anxiety because in this situation, there’s nothing we can do about it. Now, through our prayer, we can also have peace because in this situation, there’s nothing we can do about it! It’s now in God’s hands. The peace of God doesn’t mean we escape life’s dangers and dilemmas, but it does mean we have the ability to live with tranquility in the midst of them.

That peace, which Paul says stands like a guard over our hearts and minds, then allows us to live out the virtues Paul lists that I mentioned before. I read several different translations of that list and want to share a few of them with you. Just listen to how these

words of Paul are translated. As I share them, I encourage you to ask yourself, “Does this describe what’s in my mind?”

One of the words Paul uses is “true.” That also translated as “honest” or “honorable.” But one translation says, “that which has the dignity of holiness upon it.” Some of our thoughts are worthy of being called “holy,” others aren’t. Are our thoughts characterized by things that have the dignity of holiness upon them?

Another word Paul uses is translated in our pew bibles as “lovely.” I also found it rendered “attractive” or “winsome.” But here’s the one I liked the most: “that which calls forth love.” Do our thoughts call forth love? Or do they call forth something else?

The last one I want to point out is what our bibles call “praiseworthy.” This was also translated as “fair-spoken.” But what grabbed me was this: “things which are fit for God to hear.” Do we let the anxiety factory cloud our minds with worry? Like Euodia and Syntyche, do we let our mind wander to thoughts of animosity, conflict and judgment? Or do we dwell on things in our mind which are fit for God to hear?

Having a mind that works as Paul says here is not a one-time event that we accomplish or get right. It’s a process. Some days we’ll do better than others. Some days our thoughts will be pure, others not. Some days our thoughts will be admirable, others not. Some days our thoughts will have the dignity of holiness or will call forth love or will be fit for God to hear, others not. That’s why Paul says we are to put these things into practice. The word “practice” implies we have to do it over and over again in order to get better at it.

If we think on something often enough, it will come to dominate more and more of our thinking. When we are surrounded by such anxiety and sordidness and fear, the temptation is to let our minds dwell on such things, and before you know it we find we’re worrying more and thanking God less. But let’s not forget that “Rejoice” is a scriptural command. Paul says it not once but twice, a command to find joy in the midst of this worrying thing called life. This is not a command to ignore the realities we face, but to see God at work in the midst of them, to find the things that are pure and true and beautiful in a world of impurity and falsehood and ugliness. And our hope is the more we practice, the closer we get to God’s peace. We may never fully get there in this life, but in this unstable world in which we live, isn’t the idea of peace worth the effort?